

Merkeldämmerung

Merkel wins again but
Germans show a desire
for more choices.

German voters on Sunday returned Angela Merkel to her fourth and almost certainly final term as Chancellor. But they also handed the bronze medal—which was the only prize in real contention—to a protest party in a muted plea for more competition.

Exit polls pegged Mrs. Merkel's center-right Christian-democratic CDU/CSU alliance at around 33% of the vote, down eight percentage points from her win four years ago. Her coalition partners in the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) waddled in at an abysmal second-place with around 20%. The seat count in the Bundestag will take time to tabulate, but Mrs. Merkel will again control a plurality in the parliament.

The big surprise is that the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party finished third, with more than 13% of the vote. Once a wonky professors' protest party against the euro, the AfD has transformed into an anti-immigration, nationalistic echo of France's National Front. Its entry into the Bundestag marks the first time Germans have put a far-right party in parliament in decades.

This is a very German protest vote: safe. The AfD struggled for most of the campaign season, and its home-stretch surge owes to two factors. A television debate between Mrs. Merkel and her SPD challenger, Martin Schulz, this month highlighted how little the two major parties compete with each other. And polls showing Mrs. Merkel steamrolling her opponents reassured voters they could cast a ballot for the AfD without handing the party real power.

The message is that Germans want competition. The AfD draws support from voters on both left and right who are disillusioned with 12 years of Mrs. Merkel's bland-as-she-goes leadership, and with the SPD's failure to oppose her for the eight of those years when it formed coalitions with her.

This election result gives Berlin a chance to deliver the competitive politics voters want. Strong fourth- and fifth-place finishes for the free-market Free Democrats (FDP) and the Greens, winning just over and just under 10% respectively, will allow Mrs. Merkel to divorce the SPD and form a coalition with the two smaller parties. The SPD seems ready to push her in that direction instead of being gulled into another coalition.

Berlin could offer more than a browbeaten "ja" to whatever scheme for European Union fiscal integration French President Emmanuel Macron dreams up. Germans deserve a vigorous debate on EU reform. More conservative members of Mrs. Merkel's own party, who will have to find her replacement in four years, would relish the opportunity.

If the FDP enters a coalition government, Berlin also might have a shot at tax reform. Expect only marginal progress here, but the party could push Mrs. Merkel beyond the paltry €15 billion (\$17.93 billion) in personal-tax rate cuts she promised in the campaign. At least it's a start.

This election is no sea change. Mrs. Merkel's unimaginative grip on German politics is still strong, all the other parties are weak, and Germans don't like big shake-ups.

But Germany is entering the twilight of the Merkel era—call it "Merkeldämmerung"—and it's time to consider what comes next. That means policies to meet the demographic and competitive pressures bearing down on Germany, and politics that delivers meaningful debate. If Germany can't have the reforms while Mrs. Merkel is in office, its politicians can set the stage for them in the future.